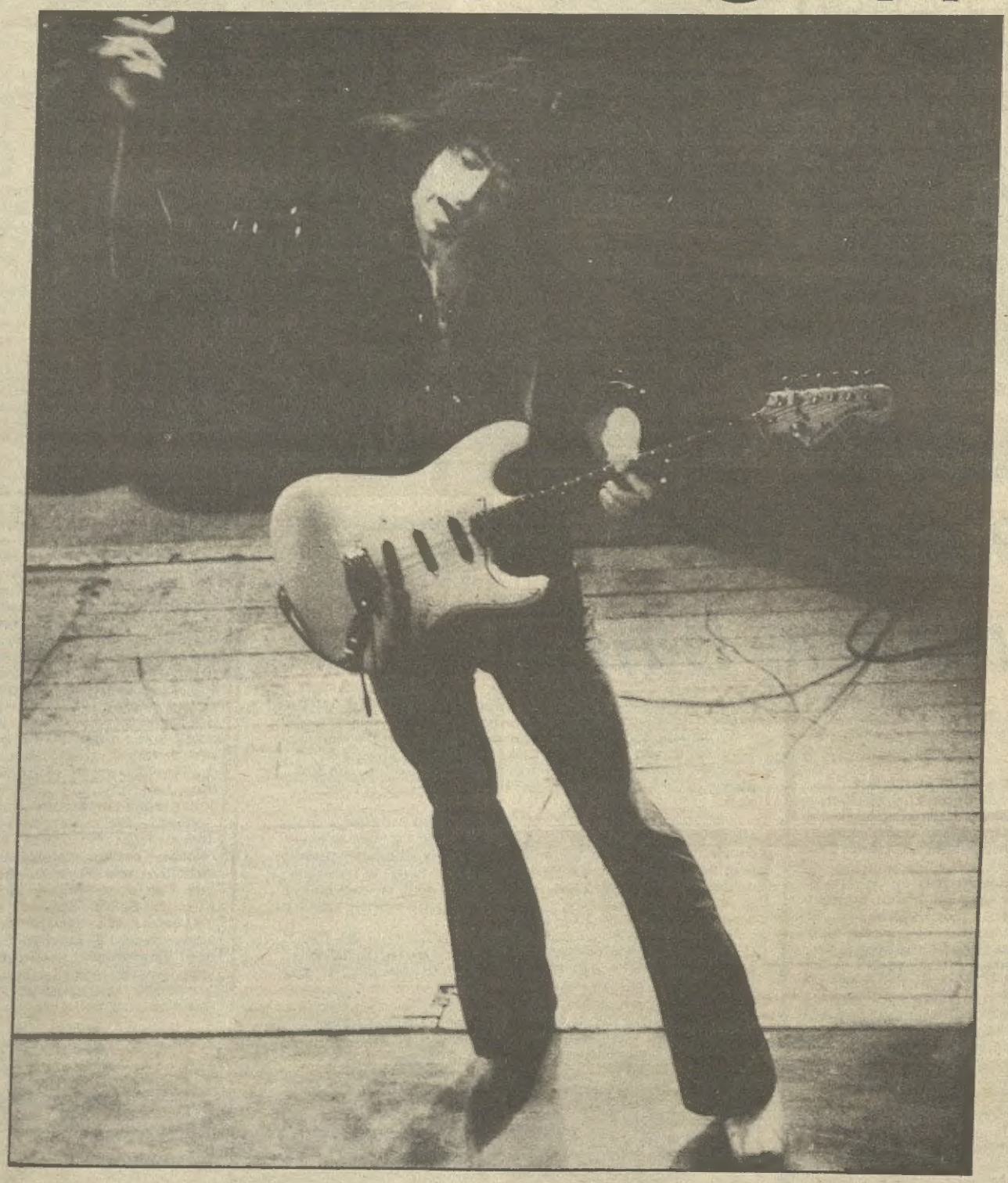
ON THE ROAD

RAINBOW



ROUSING

SINCE YOU'VE been gone, there's been a fair amount happening, Ritchie. The New Wave changed its spots when the leading contenders decided that rather than change the world they'd like to become rock and roll stars instead. And once people tumbled to the realisation that basic punk and basic heavy metal are virtually the same thing a young breed of metallic bands came hurtling out of the closet and were promptly packaged up by increasingly nervous record companies as 'New Wave heavy metal'. Right now, everyone who's old enough to go to the toilet by themselves is bouncing up and down to the 2 Tone sound.

But you've nothing to worry about, Ritchie. You've just had the biggest hit single of your career over here and, in the context of the changes we've been going through, a few new faces at Rainbow aren't going to rock the boat, particularly when one of them is an old friend. Anyway, you didn't really think we'd expect you back with the same line-up twice in a row did you? . . .

AS ELGAR'S 'Pomp And Circumstance' Overture glides into 'Land Of Hope And Glory' the lights of the Newcastle City Hall cut out and the massed ranks of denim leap to their feet with a spontaneous roar of acclaim that could be translated as 'Those who are about to have their cake and eat it, salute you.'

A synthesised version of Holst's 'Mars' cuts through the noisy, steamy darkness and as the chugging guitar riff to 'Eyes Of The World' takes over the stage is suddenly bathed in light — Rainbow are strutting it in Britain again.

Over on the right there's Ritchie Blackmore looking exactly the same as he did on the last tour (and the one before that and . . .). And behind that pile of percussion with his head bobbing up and down between his flailing arms like a swimmer doing the butterfly stroke must be Cozy Powell.

Reassured, we can start taking in the new figures in the landscape. Next to Blackmore there's vocalist Graham Bonnet, looking positively suave in heavy metal terms with slicked back hair, dark glasses and a white suit. He's left most of the stock HM vocalist cliches for the so-called 'New Wave heavy metal' bands (ho ho). Instead he goes for the straightforward approach and relies on his powerful but pitch-perfect voice to make its impact. And despite the fact that his throat has 'turned yellow', as he admitted shortly before the gig, the impact is very impressive.

Further along to the left, wearing a sinister-looking Mafia hat, is Roger Glover, Ritchie's old Deep Purple mate and a much-needed source of detached inspiration to the band as his production job on 'Down To Earth' shows. His playing needs no introduction and he, like Ritchie, puts accuracy before flash.

And finally, there's Don Airey playing in front of his home-town crowd (well he's from Sunderland actually). Easily the most proficient keyboard player to have graced the Rainbow ranks, he's not quite as distinctive in the sound mix as he should be, but what's coming through sounds meaty enough.

By now we're roaring through 'Love's No Friend', also from the latest album, and Ritchie is beginning to get into his stride, performing various sleights of hand on his fretboard and scarcely bothering to strike the strings with his right hand — the actions of his left hand are setting up sufficient vibrations.

Bonnet then dedicates the next song, 'Since You Been Gone', to the small cluster of journalists who've come up for the gig, telling us where the exit doors are if we're getting bored. As I consider calling up the Porton Down Germ Warfare Research Establishment to check out what other throat viruses they're working on, Blackmoore broods a while on 'Greensleeves' (have you noticed how there are more classical titles than rock titles in this set) before striking up the riff of their 'Big Hit Single'. And I'm forced to admit that it shows the band to be as sharp, tight and alert as I've ever witnessed.

FROM THERE, Blackmore leads the band into a trio of classic Rainbow songs — 'Over The Rainbow', the grandiose, ponderous 'Man On A Silver Mountain' and the long drawn-out 'Catch The Rainbow' which is the launching pad for Blackmore's most potent guitar work of the evening. Over two solos separated by a brief burst from Cozy he works himself into a fair old lather until by the end the notes are pouring out of his guitar in an uninterrupted stream. "It always works," says Bonnet with evident satisfaction after the searing, climatic end.

The power spills over onto 'Lost In Hollywood' and Blackmore seizes another solo, this time much harsher with the feedback zipping back and forth between the PA stacks. He gives way to Don Airey who indulges in some pomp craziness as Bach's Toccata and Fugue jostles with snatches of 'Smoke On The Water' (teasing the audience dangerously) and 'Green Onions'. Cozy Powell follows up with his tour de force that is as outrageously over the top as ever, '1812 Overture' pyrotechnics and all.

The encores bring out another track from the new album, 'All Night Long', together with 'Long Live Rock 'N' Roll' which incorporated Blackmore's ritual guitar sacrifice (the lucky recipient of the remains was escorted out of the hall by security staff for his own protection) and a pulverising finish.

As one who believes that Rainbow have not yet made a 'great' album (although they're getting closer every time) I found the new material more invigorating than the older songs because it reflects the current make-up of the band more aptly and offers a positive direction for them to move in.

Having said that, the more 'traditional' part of the Rainbow set with its extravagant solos was noisily appreciated by the crowd and would obviously be missed. But if Rainbow are to expand their following — which even Ritchie would probably admit is the name of the game — then they should start capitalising on Bonnet's arrival because he transforms the emphasis from the past to the future.

AS TO RITCHIE Blackmore himself, he couldn't have failed any of his admirers and he remains a curiously charismatic figure on stage. Beyond what you actually see and hear on stage he is quite impenetrable. Towards the end of the show I waded down the front to see if there was some flicker or twitch close up that might provide a few clues. I didn't get much; just an intuition that his love/hate relationship with his guitar is not unlike that of Pete Townshend and that the discrepancies in such a relationship are not easy for him to solve.

In the dressing room afterwards a shattered Cozy Powell (he'd spent the couple of days between the European tour and the British dates driving back from Germany, breaking down in Dover, catching a taxi straight to Heathrow (!) and hiring another car which was left looking somewhat the worse for wear by fans after the previous night's gig) said that the first night in Newcastle had been diabolical but they'd changed the set around for tonight's gig.

"Tonight was better. About a seven. But we've been doing a lot of nines on this tour. I'd have done a better solo too but I was exhausted and my hands just wouldn't obey some of the orders."

He also felt that the band was having to adjust to playing smaller British halls from those they are normally used to. "We sound better in the bigger halls because we have room to move and we can control the sound levels more easily."

Later on back at the hotel the legendary, moody, unfathomable, unpredictable, etc. etc. etc. Ritchie Blackmore is feeling happy enough with the evening's proceedings to socialise a little. When I mention my feelings about the set he replies that he prefers a format that gives him room to manoeuvre. "I don't want to play a set of short songs because it doesn't give me the framework to take off as and when I want.

"I need that freedom because I want that challenge. I have a fear of getting stale on stage and I'm always looking for ways to avoid that."

In the past Ritchie has staved off boredom by keeping everyone else on edge. Hence the line-up changes which have held the band back. This band already looks settled and Roger Glover is Ritchie's best song-writing partner yet.

They've got a lot going for them if they want.

HUGH FIELDER

GRAHAM BONNET

COZY POWELL

ROGER GLOVER

DON AIREY